THE YEBEKOLO

131 Location: 12°08 to 12°45 long.
3°50 to 4°20 north lat.

Physical and Human Geography

Area: about 1, 950 square km.
161 Population: 23, 291 inhabitants
Density: 11. 9 persons per square km.

133 The territory of the Yebekolo, in the form of a cornucopia laid on its side, is all to be found in the basin of the Nyong. The river forms its southern boundary. The tributaries on the right bank have broad beds and, in the vicinity of the Nyong, often overflow so that the valleys are frequently flooded. /90/ This is a large territory, covered with forest and quite marshy.

361 Large villages are found here. While the food crops are not poor,
262 they are not very abundant. The people who live near the Nyong supplement their food supply by fishing and hunting.

174 It is difficult to say what may be the remote origins of this people. Their oral traditions (as reported by Mr. Tremesaygues) speak of their ancestor as being of Yambasa stock and, therefore, as having lived about 200 kilometers west of their present settlement, north of the Sanaga. /Map 18/ Moving eastward, the Yebekolo met first the Omvang and then the Maka, whom they pushed back to their present habitat.

The German maps, however, do not confirm these traditions. Also based on traditions, upon which linguistic data is often superimposed, they show all the Yebekolo as part of the "Mvele complex" (see detailed maps in Deutsches Kolonialblatt, 1907) under the name "Pangwe." It is possible that a borrowing of language occurred here —for a linguistic fact provides clues rather than permanent solutions to ethnographic problems.

● 648 When the Germans arrived in the territory of the Yebekolo (1904-
489 1905), the latter submitted to them without resistance. The new occupants found them settled on the big eastern trials leading to Doumé. From that time on the trails were improved, and the Yebekolo thus found themselves situated on the big trade routes by which the products of the eastern forest were taken to the coastal regions. /91/

family, had a profound sense of being a member of a community scattered over several thousand square kilometers, whereas he did not feel strongly bound to his neighbor who belonged to another ayoñ.

The German colonial administration divided the country up into large chiefdoms as a solution to this difficult problem, a possible solution if the country had not been an ethnic as well as a clan maze. If the territory of the large tribes—Boulou, Bané, Ewondo, etc.—had been a little more homogeneous, it would have been conceivable to entrust each region to a chief, at a higher level than that of clan allotments. But the confusion of peoples and their wide dispersion made any solution precarious. Authority was not always accepted without demur, and among populations with anarchistic tendencies it is not easy to build up a ruling class /aristocratie/ sufficiently sure of itself not to perpetrate abuses. There was no time for the system of large appanages to take root. Chiefs of cantons and village chiefs both rule over more limited but clear-cut territories; as representatives of the principle of jus soli their influence view with that of the clan movements embodying the jus sanguinis.

In Gabon, Pahouin leaders had the idea of mingling the two tendencies. Starting with the assumption that the villages were too small, they sanctioned a regrouping which would have allowed both stronger chiefdoms and a beginning of reassembling of clans.

The regrouping of the meyoñ does not seem to have been planned as a whole, nor does it seem that a territorial base had been thought of for each clan, which would have resolved, for the time being at least, the conflict between the law of things /droit réel/ and the law of persons /droit personnel/. Only a partial solution was considered: the establishment of large, single-clan villages (1). In

1. J. Aubame, Renaissance gabonaise /Renaissance in Gabon/, Brazzaville, 1947 (no. 171); Balandier and Pauvert (no 177).

fact, and in spite of the endless difficulties connected with the transfer of population, the regrouping was able to give to the chiefdom a new prestige, by confirming its character as a territorial power on the one hand, and by binding it, on the other hand, to the meyoñ traditions. In the present state of affairs, cantons and even villages

631 include representatives of all the clans. Who then could exercise
668 authority over such a motley population, if they were to follow purely traditional rules? Various methods are used for selecting chiefs. In one place people adhere to investing the legitimate heir of the lineage of the village founder. Elsewhere, a representative of the largest ayoñ is sought. Quite often, particularly in the Cameroons, the choice of chief by /130/ election is believed to allow the population to express their views, whatever the motives of selection may be. Will the village regrouping movement permit the establishment of a new, better-adapted system? A blaze of enthusiasm has gripped the Fang people, convinced that the new system will make it possible to solve all problems as by a magical formula, without sacrificing either traditional forms or individual anarchy.

In the Cameroons a few years ago the movement to regroup the meyoñ appeared just as likely to bring an end to all difficulties. More bound up with traditional institutions, the meyoñ organization movement set out simply to give some order to the intellectual and moral /behavioral?—Tr./ life of groups by codifying customs, taking note of traditions, and creating a collective awareness, a common clan sentiment, through periodic meetings, dances, and songs. In contrast to the movement in Gabon, the bisulan movement hardly touches upon the concrete, the economic field.

It is worth emphasizing that this movement did not question the administrative division into regions and subdivisions. The bisulan do not in fact seem to have voiced any criticism of this distinction, and the population of Dja-and-Lobo even expressed a lively wish to see Sangmélima raised to regional status and separated administratively from the N'Tem region.

In fact, though local organization at the lowest levels may not have found its bearings, at a higher level it seems to have become thoroughly incorporated in the country. When they reached Pahouin
646 country, the European powers—France, Germany, Spain—set up a
631 network of resident posts for the representatives of authority. In this country without crystallizing centers, the main town of a subdivision has become a town with a town's multiple functions, administrative, judicial, cultural (missions and schools), economic (road station,
[484] trade). A study of the journeys made by the rural population of the southern Cameroons shows clearly that these towns are no longer artificial centers but genuine points of attraction. The capital of

their subdivision is the goal of 37 percent of travelers. The motives indicated vary greatly: people go there for reasons connected with their jobs (1.3%), for medical care (2%), to attend to matrimonial affairs (9.5%), to visit relatives (10.5%), merely for their own pleasure (23%), to attend to business connected with the public services (civil status /état civil/, law, various public departments, in 45% of the cases). There is no need to underline the importance of contacts with the administration. So in the Cameroons it has been thought necessary to decentralize the administrative machinery further and to place it within reach of the people. The establishment of new subdivisions within the Yaoundé region and of administrative posts in Boulou country demonstrate this attitude. All this takes place as if the Pahouin, in vague resentment /131/ against the inadequacies of their traditional organization, were trying to replace them with new and foreign institutions.

In order to prevent the population from totally committing its fate into the hands of the European organization and thereafter refusing to make any personal effort at improving their condition, the French administration has attempted, at the same time as it distributed authority throughout the country, to remove concentration at the center. Though it was beneficial to multiply the agents of the central power in contact with the population, it was even more necessary to give the people or their representatives the opportunity to manage public services and to organize the collective life.

Civil law was, therefore, largely decentralized. In addition to the first- and second-degree courts at which subdivision or regional heads /chefs de... —the implication here is of French colonial officials. —Tr./ made decisions based on custom, assisted by African assessors, there were created a great many "customary" courts whose judges were not officials. In the majority of cases, chiefs were thus appointed as presidents of customary courts, with prominent men and secretaries to help them. The number of cases dealt with allows us to believe that the reform has been beneficial. Though the nature of the suits has no bearing on the local government organization, it should, nevertheless, be mentioned for the light it throws on the points of friction that exist between individuals.

In the Cameroons the distribution was as follows: divorces, 38 percent; liberation of widows, 6 percent; adultery, 9 percent; real property rights, 17 percent. These represent the principal disputes; the probable maladjustment of matrimonial institutions provides the main portion.

Next, the establishment of urban and rural municipal councils permits financial decentralization. Towns under the term "urban communes," cantons, and sometimes whole subdivisions under the term "rural communes," received a legal character, with a domain to manage and a budget to fix. Elected councilors under an appointed mayor had to study plans for road works, to set up construction or maintenance programs, inquire into taxes? /taxes/ and assessments /impôts/, and have an eye to a sound financial position.

In towns this was nothing new, but its extension to wide rural areas was an experiment. Boulou or Beti country, where there was no risk of these new methods giving offense to a strong traditional /social/ structure, was the ideal place for trying out a new /kind of/ organization.

Throughout the elections arranged to fill the posts of councilor, we can see crystallizing the most striking traits of the new élite, the characteristics of the aristocracy or oligarchy that will get itself into power.

Pessimists had expressed fear that such elections, based on almost universal suffrage, would overthrow the classical social values and impair the prestige of the present acting élite.

This point of view disregarded the fact that in a country practically without stratification, no one can keep authority without the support of public opinion. /132/ Granting the vote to vassals in a feudal society may unsettle the power of the nobility. It is quite otherwise here, where chiefs of village or canton are most commonly chosen by election.

The older men have preserved a privileged position vis-à-vis the younger generation. A comparison of the age pyramid of councilors with that of the adult male population as a whole readily shows this: (table on following page).

The younger generation is poorly represented. Mature men of thirty to forty are represented in proportion to their ratio in the total population; but men of forty to fifty or of the older age group are heavily represented. Electoral influence has not been seized by the younger men.

Neither does it appear that the poorer class, more numerous than the rich, has benefited from the ballot so as to eliminate the latter. From the point of view of the possession of a certain amount of wealth, we can assert that municipal councilors are much better off than the common people.

171 We find further confirmation of the foregoing in the
174 following lines: "In archaic times, before the unification of Egypt into a single kingdom, it was no doubt the tribal chiefs who, as Pharaoh did later for the entire country, declared war, dispensed justice, and offered the sacrifices." (1)

1. The Life-Work of Sir Peter Le Page Renouf (Paris, 1902-07), Vol. 2, p. 351, "The Priestly Character of the Earliest Egyptian Civilization."

As religious leader the]Fan] tribal chief can thus delegate his authority only to the practitioner; as totemic chief, only to his direct consanguineal heir.

614 This is true to such a degree that if, for instance, the family should die out, the tribe would not come to an end or be destroyed, for the elders of the clan or of the mother tribe would trace genealogies back to the beginning or source of the race and find a secondary family related more closely to the founder of the race; that secondary family would in turn become the main lineage. This transfer comes about quite naturally, without hitch or conflict, merely by force of circumstances. In some cases, especially with a small clan, families will attach themselves to other clans; again, according to the formative law given earlier, new clans will be created, filials of the mother branch. If a mother clan is involved, then, on the contrary, families will attach themselves more willingly to the filial branch (branch in esa), where they will find the family totem (esamvên, esamvûn, etc.).

d) Mistakes made by European administration in appointing new tribal chiefs from outside the main lineage

● 648 622 Clearly the chief mistake, and hence the lack of success, of civil administrators or military leaders who for one reason or another depose the legitimate chief of a tribe and appoint another is clear from the totemic laws just enumerated and the very structure of the race. I willingly admit that sometimes such depositions and appointments may, and often should be made,

●648 622 [546] for perfectly legitimate reasons, in the interests of the conquering country and even of the administered peoples. Nevertheless, if European administrators knew more about the customs of the country, (1) as would be very desirable, they

> 1. Especially since the law permits native customs "in so far as they are not contrary to decency and morality."

would not leave themselves open to certain failure and sometimes to humiliating defeat by picking out a man who, though perfectly worthy, cannot be appointed chief according to the laws of the land.

As I myself have seen, it often happens that the legitimate chief, tired of endless trouble, reproaches, and quite justifiable fines, in some way agrees to the new state of affairs, which henceforth relieves him of responsibility and shelters him from the conqueror's laws, ordinances, and capriciousness, or what he takes to be such. Thus, in certain villages, there will be a chief "at the disposal" of Europeans, just as there are certain women, always supposedly virgins, at their disposal. Actually, these chiefs will have only factitious authority, dependent entirely upon the power of the white man. They will also be in constant danger of being poisoned or of disappearing in more or less occult fashion. They are obeyed out of fear, but only in matters that have to do with government, such as forced labor, requisitioned foodstuffs, auxiliary workers, and hardly mentionable favors, but as concerns everything else, their authority is nil, not only in fact but in principle. How, for instance, could they, when there is danger to clan or tribe, invoke a general totem which is not theirs and of which they are neither representatives nor custodians?

Thus we can see the source of the mistake of European administrations, who are very little concerned anyhow with the ideas underlying the indigenous structure and hence the very existence of the tribe, and who want to give it a code made up for Europeans, an impossible task. To apply the Napoleonic

●648 622 Code to indigenous tribes, as has been decreed in Gabon, is one of those governmental aberrations that reveals as profound an ignorance as possible of the people to be governed and the principles of government. [547]

For the same reasons, one can understand how impossible it is to elect a chief outside the established rules of succession. A chief appointed from outside the main lineage has not, and cannot have, authority.

e) Change of clan totem

779 622 644 When, for the above reasons, authority have passed to another clan family, the public cult remains the same. But it must be emphasized as of the greatest importance that the ancestral totem disappears, since it has no longer an eponymous representative of its own blood. It will be replaced by the family totem of the new chief, which then becomes the totem for the whole tribe or clan. Far from being hypothetical, this is, on the contrary, a repeated occurrence, of which the following is a typical illustration.

A certain Mba-Alame, of the Yebiken or Banana clan, left the tribe after a dispute with his clan chief and went to establish a village on a hill facing his old village. While remaining on fairly good terms with the people of his former clan, his first concern was to create a new family of his own and to cut himself off distinctly from his former companions. He therefore changed his name and took another, which happened to be Nzoge Nze, Elephant-son-of the Panther. The panther became his new totem and from then on, that of his sons and of the future clan. He was in the full sense of the term, the new father of the tribe, able to say more justifiably than Marshal Lefebevre once did: "We are the forefathers!"

In order to undertake this sort of action, a man must have a very resolute character, capable of breaking with his kin, friends, and clan without fearing the always fatal reprisals.

Moreover, such a happening is only possible if the tribe is small enough, because in a large tribe the chief would be very